

# The Resident's Workbook

for Dealing with Vacant  
Buildings and Lots

September 2023

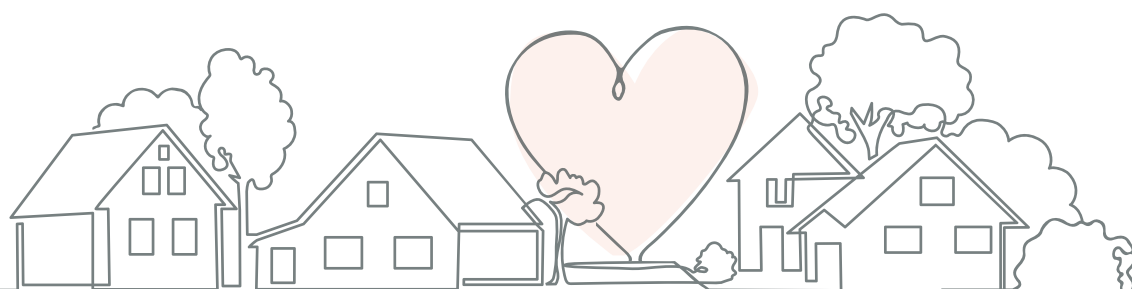


You deserve to live in a safe, vibrant  
neighborhood. And you have the  
power to lead and demand change.

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We surveyed and spoke with dozens of residents, local activists, block club members, and other community leaders to develop this workbook.





# Welcome!

If you're picking up this workbook, chances are you've noticed vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties in your community. You want to do something about them, but you don't know where to start. Maybe you've been calling 311 on the same abandoned property for years, to no avail. Or maybe you've been mowing the vacant lot next door and you want to do more. But how?

Vacant properties—whether it's a dilapidated, abandoned house or a vacant, overgrown lot—harm neighbors and neighborhoods. More than just eyesores, they threaten public health and safety, drain tax dollars, bring down property values, and make residents like you feel like “nobody cares” about the neighborhood.

Yet, doing something about vacant buildings is so hard because of the complicated web of laws that govern who owns a property and what a local government can do when that owner neglects two basic responsibilities: taking care of their property and paying property taxes.

As the only national nonprofit dedicated to tackling the systems that cause vacant properties at scale, we at the Center for Community Progress work to help local, state, and federal leaders understand and reform the systems that perpetuate property vacancy and deterioration. We also provide direct, customized, expert guidance to help cities reform policies and practices for tackling vacancy in specific communities.

However, we developed *The Resident's Workbook for Dealing with Vacant Homes and Lots* because you are the person living next door to, or down the street from, the abandoned house. You deserve to live in a safe, vibrant neighborhood. And you have the power to lead and demand change.




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## How to Use This Workbook

We surveyed and spoke with dozens of residents, local activists, block club members, and other community leaders to develop this workbook. Because every community is different, this workbook is focused on helping you identify the challenges, opportunities, and resources specific to where you live.

Depending on how involved you are in your community already, you may be more ready for some activities than others. We've organized the activities in this workbook using these icons:

-  **I'm new to this!** You're curious, ready to get involved, and just need a starting point. This activity requires minimal time commitment and/or resources.
-  **I'm ready to do more!** You're already involved in some capacity and want to take the next step. May require some time commitment and/or resources.
-  **I'm a community champion!** You're regularly active in your community and looking for ways to do more. May require significant time commitment and/or resources.

### Finally, community revitalization happens best when done with...well, **community!**

While you can do some of this work solo, there is strength in numbers. Share this workbook with your neighbors and develop a plan together for implementing the neighborhood change you all wish to see.

### TIP Share the Knowledge!

Once you fill out a page with information specific to your community, make copies for your neighbors, email it to a neighborhood listserv, or share it in an appropriate local group on social media.





# Getting Involved

Community revitalization is about making neighborhoods better for the people who live there. As a resident, you should feel seen, your voice heard, and like you belong and matter to your community. The first step to shaping the policies, practices, and services that touch your neighborhood is to find out how you can get involved in the first place.

## How Do I Get Involved?

Find out who the movers and shakers are in your neighborhood, where they get their local news, and where they're gathering in-person and online.

**Social media platforms** like Facebook, Nextdoor, and Meetup are great places to find out about opportunities to volunteer and meet neighbors who are also interested (or already active) in community groups. Some search terms you can put into Facebook to find active groups are “[my city/neighborhood] community news” or “[my town] association” or “[my county] residents’ group.” (Note: Please treat people with kindness online, even if you disagree with their opinion!)

**Ask established community leaders** where they go for local news and discussion. For example, if you're a parent of a school-aged child, you may find your Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) has an active “moms’ group” that organizes community cleanups. If you're a member of a religious institution, your local faith leader could tell you about a regular volunteer day. Maybe “Janet” who's lived down the street for 20 years knows a lot about the local history and happenings—chat her up next time you're outside!

### Set Your Goals:

First, define the problem you're trying to address in your community. Is it a single vacant house, vacant lot, or vacant storefront? Or is the problem bigger, like a struggling downtown business district? Describe the challenge and whether your goal is to take action yourself (for example, you want to start a community garden on an abandoned lot) or to have your local government do something (like board up a vacant building or clean up illegal dumping).

### What Does Success Look Like?:

What do you envision for your neighborhood when you hear the word “revitalization”? What do you think you need to accomplish that vision?

**Identify local news sources** that publish community updates. For example, Google “[my alderman/councilmember] email newsletter” or “[my city/neighborhood] local blog” or “[my county] community calendar.” If you’re having trouble finding these, ask in one of the social media groups or established community leaders above where they get their local news.

Now that you know where to find these opportunities, you could:

-  **Volunteer:** Volunteering is a good way to make a difference and meet neighbors who share your community goals. You could contact a local nonprofit to participate in a housing rehabilitation project (e.g., Habitat for Humanity), sign up for a community cleanup through your neighborhood association, or even simply take a walk with a pair of gloves and a trash bag to pick up litter around a nearby vacant lot.
-  **Join a neighborhood group:** Neighborhood groups (like block clubs or neighborhood associations) are formed by a group of neighbors coming together to make their community a better place to live. They help residents enhance their quality of life by working together around common goals like addressing vacant properties and other goals.
-  **Start a neighborhood group:** If where you live doesn’t have a neighborhood group yet, consider starting one. However, it’s hard work: getting a neighborhood group off the ground takes a lot of time, effort, and persistence, and keeping momentum going can be emotionally draining. If you’re up to the challenge, one way to get started is to create a group on social media to generate interest and members, and then formalize it with in-person meetings and events. Use the template on page 9 can help you begin to form your team for in-person meetings. You could also consider partnering with a local nonprofit on neighborhood revitalization initiatives (see “The Mayor of South Seventh Street”).

## TIP

Consider partnering with a local nonprofit on neighborhood revitalization initiatives (see the Success Story “The Mayor of South Seventh Street” on page 7).

## How Do I Get Others Involved?

If you’re already an active leader in your community, one of the biggest challenges can be getting and *keeping* residents involved. Consider these ideas for increasing resident engagement:

**Meet residents where they are:** Find the schedule that works best for most of your community members—for example, hold meetings in the evening to accommodate busy workday schedules. Host meetings in the places where your residents worship, eat, or congregate, or consider hosting them virtually. Be flexible and survey your community to find out the best way to actively involve them.

continued on next page



**Assign leaders:** Allow community members to not only feel like participants, but owners of a project by giving them a type of leadership role. This encourages responsibility, pride, and helps develop leadership skills. It also gives residents another way to make decisions about the future of their neighborhood.

**Incentivize participation:** Incentives—like small-amount gas cards, giveaways, or awards—make volunteers feel valued and can help motivate them to keep showing up. When hosting community events or projects, keep an eye out for your most engaged residents and award small incentives to encourage them to keep the momentum going.

# TIP

Here are some questions to ask as you participate in or host your next community meeting:

What are the strengths of our community?

Should we start any new projects or initiatives?

What are the most pressing issues facing our community right now?

How can we work with local businesses and organizations?

What resources or services does our community need the most?

What challenges are being overlooked or underestimated in our community?

## Success Story:

### The Mayor of South Seventh Street

Some call her the Mayor of South Seventh Street. Others say she's the Matriarch of the South of Penn neighborhood. Jeanette Buchanon is a titan in her community and has been integral in transforming her corner of the city.

Jeanette learned of the Reading, Pennsylvania nonprofit Barrio Alegria after the organization acted on neighbors' desire for cleanups to beautify their community. Her home was adjacent to an empty lot that for years collected litter.

Together with Barrio, Jeanette transformed the space into a place for frequent live musical performances, movie nights, and celebrations. The space—now dubbed Lucky's Lane—has given new life to her block. Government officials and private foundations have taken note of Jeanette's work and began investing in her projects.

The City of Reading plans to pave the gravel lot and install planters. The local Wyomissing Foundation, now seeing value in revitalizing the area, will provide grants to help more than a dozen residents improve their facades.

Jeanette has been a tireless advocate for her community and an example for her neighbors, showing that a better city is possible with the right partners, passion, and vision.

*Credit: Daniel Egusquiza, Barrio Alegria*



Did you know that Center for Community Progress has a fellowship program designed for residents? The Community Revitalization Fellowship is offered every two years for grassroots leaders to visit each other's communities, showcase their resident-led revitalization efforts, and share ideas for tackling challenges.

Learn more:  
[communityprogress.org/crf](https://communityprogress.org/crf)



## Who's in Charge? Get to Know Your Local Government

Every community has local government authorities responsible for public services. Use this form to identify your local representatives and how to reach them.

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**My Local Government's Website:**

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**My Local Elected Officials and Contact Information:**

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**Municipal Councilmember:**

(e.g., who represents you on city council, town council, town board, village council, or board of aldermen)

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**State-level Political Representative:**

(e.g., who represents your district in your State Assembly/Legislature/Senate)

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**Mayor:**

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**Other relevant local government bodies  
serving your community:**

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**County Leadership:**

(e.g., what is the body in charge of your county—county commission, board of supervisors, county council)

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**How do you submit complaints/issues to your city about vacant properties, trash,  
and other nuisances?** (e.g., 311 request, email, phone number)

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**Does your community have a local organization, committee, or group responsible for  
revitalization and beautification?** (e.g., a block club, neighborhood association like "Keep [City]  
Beautiful," business improvement district, community development corporation)

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**Is your community served by a land bank?**

(Look it up in Community Progress' National Land Bank Map at [communityprogress.org/land-bank-map](https://communityprogress.org/land-bank-map) )

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**Who are some other influential people in your city who you could contact or involve  
in property revitalization efforts?** (e.g., business owners, school board members)

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## Form a Neighborhood Group

Ready to start a neighborhood association, committee, or block club? Use this form to figure out the who, what, when, why, and how of your group.

**Meeting location:**

**Meeting time and frequency:**

**Officers and responsibilities:**

**Our mission:**

**Specific geographic boundaries of area we will serve:**

**Our main issues to solve:**

**How to get the word out about our group:**

**Ideas for projects, programs, and activities:**

**How we'll keep residents engaged:**

**What resources will we need:**

**What success looks like for our group:**



# Determine Your Strategy

Think back to the challenges you identified in your community and the goals you set. You probably picked up this workbook because you're concerned about one or more vacant properties—abandoned buildings or vacant lots—in your community. The next step is to **figure out your strategy for what to do next.**

## “One or Two” Vacant Properties vs. “Systemic Vacancy”

Having a few vacant properties is a normal part of a healthy housing ecosystem. In a neighborhood with a strong housing market, there will be fewer harmful, long-time vacant properties because their owners have more incentive to sell, and buyers have more incentive to buy.

But widespread vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties (due to population/economic decline and intergenerational poverty), change the character of a neighborhood and perpetuate a negative cycle of vacancy. A property owner is more likely to abandon rather than sell a property if the cost to fix it up and pay off property taxes is more than what the market has decided the property is worth. More abandoned properties intensify poor living conditions for the people who remain, impacting the economy, community, housing stock, and residents, which in turn fuels more abandonment. We call this systemic vacancy: the community experience of widespread property vacancy caused by the combined actions of people, policies, and practices.

**Why does this matter to you?** If you suspect your community is dealing with systemic vacancy, then your local government may have fewer resources to help you, or has to prioritize dealing with the most dangerous properties first. Your neighbors might be harder to mobilize because, surrounded by vacant properties, they might feel like no one cares about them.

But don't be discouraged! Systemic vacancy takes decades to take hold and can't be solved overnight. The important thing is your commitment to taking that first step.



## Dealing with Vacant Houses

**Report it:** Vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated houses (and lots) attract trash, pests, and illegal activity. If there is a vacant property in your community, report it to your local code enforcement department or 311. Many code enforcement departments keep a database of vacant properties in their community so that they can identify repeat offenders and track fines and public costs associated with abating issues on the property. Even if your code enforcement department doesn't have the tools it needs to address every property, by reporting a vacant house you're doing the city—and your neighbors—a favor by making it clear that someone in the community cares.

**Attend and raise issues at community meetings:** Your local government likely holds public meetings where all manner of community issues, including economic revitalization and public safety, are discussed. Find out when and where public community meetings are held and attend. This will help you meet residents who share your concerns and give you an opportunity to ask policymakers why nothing has been done about a vacant property you've been reporting for years, for example.

**Count the vacant properties in your community:** A low-cost way to understand the scale of vacant properties in your community is to do a "windshield survey"—drive or walk around your community and take note of which properties appear to be vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated from the windshield of your car (or sidewalk, if you're on foot!). Data helps you figure out where to prioritize efforts. Use the template on page 15 to complete this activity.




### TIP Vacant or Occupied?

Sometimes houses that look vacant, with overgrown lawns or trash dumped in the yard, are in fact lawfully occupied by an owner or tenant. **These residents may not be able to afford a new lawnmower, or to replace a roof due to disability, fixed income, or an unscrupulous landlord.** And, unfortunately, many code enforcement departments have limited resources and staffing and are able only to focus on fining people already unable to pay to fix the issue that would bring them into compliance. If it is safe to do so, and without trespassing on the property, find out if a home is occupied. If you know the residents, ask if there are ways you can help, either by occasionally mowing their lawn or giving them the contact information for local aid groups and community services.



## Dealing with Vacant Lots

Dealing with vacant lots involves a lot of the same tactics as vacant structures; you can report overgrown grass and weeds, count lots in a windshield survey, and raise public safety and quality of life issues related to vacant lots in community meetings. Repurposing and maintaining vacant lots, also known as “vacant land stewardship,” has some unique opportunities to get involved.

-  **Join a community cleanup:** If you identified some local communication channels (page 8)—like a local councilmember’s newsletter, a Facebook group, or a neighborhood block club—ask about or keep an eye out for community cleanups. Joining a group of neighbors for an hour or two to pick up trash in the community can feel incredibly rewarding.
-  **Organize vacant lot cleanup and maintenance:** If there’s a specific lot that’s consistently overgrown and attracting trash, reach out to your local elected official, neighborhood group, or department of public works to organize some volunteer property maintenance.
-  **Create a community asset:** Land is finite, and vacant land is an untapped resource. There are dozens of examples of residents and community organizations buying vacant lots and turning them into gardens, gathering spaces, green stormwater infrastructure, pocket parks and more. You can buy vacant lots from a land bank (if your community is served by one), and some cities even have “Mow to Own” programs that allow residents to purchase a vacant lot adjacent to their property for a nominal fee if they demonstrate that they’ve been maintaining it. If you’re leading a neighborhood group or local nonprofit interested in buying a vacant lot, make sure to get input from the community on what use of space would be most beneficial.

### TIP

See dozens of examples of community-led efforts to reclaim vacant properties, from solar farms to pocket parks, in Community Progress’ [Vacant Land Stewardship](#) and [Creative Placemaking](#) databases.



## What Is a Land Bank?

A land bank is a public entity with unique powers to put vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties back to productive use according to community goals. A land bank's primary purpose is to acquire properties that some call "blighted" and temporarily hold and take care of them until they can be transferred to new, responsible owners. State laws give land banks their unique powers. While these powers vary state to state, ideally land banks can: acquire tax-foreclosed property cost-effectively; flexibly sell property to a responsible buyer or developer, driven not by the highest price but by the outcome that most closely aligns with community goals; extinguish liens and clear title; and hold property tax exempt.

Some land banks offer programs that support property ownership by transferring properties to responsible new owners at minimal cost—for instance, Albany County's Land Bank's Spend a Little, Get a LOT! program lets residents buy a lot adjacent to their property for as little as \$100.

Learn more about **land banks** at: [communityprogress.org/resources/land-banks](https://communityprogress.org/resources/land-banks) and check out our **National Land Bank Network Map** at: [communityprogress.org/land-bank-map](https://communityprogress.org/land-bank-map) to see if there is a land bank already serving your community.

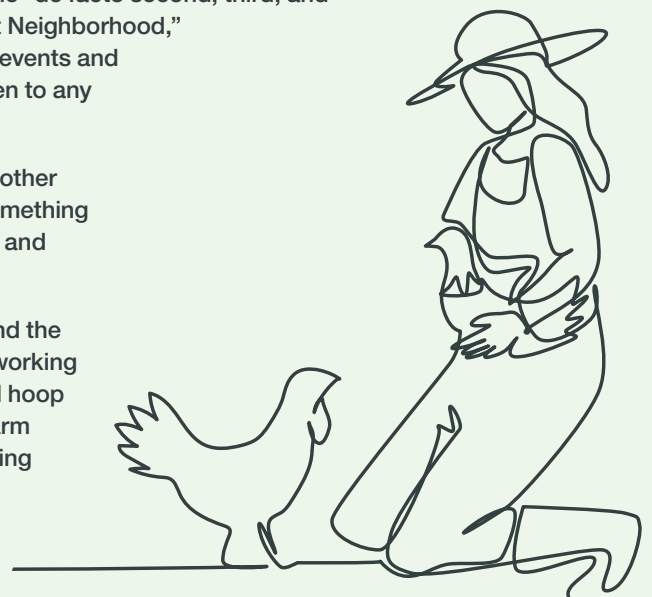
## Success Story: A Vacant Lot Turned Urban Farm

Marion "Anita" Gardner is a force for change in her Cleveland community. The 71-year-old activist and former councilwoman attended housing court to hold inspectors and policymakers accountable and, through her organization—the Concerned Citizens Community Council (CCCC)—she spent every spare moment providing opportunities for her neighbors to learn job skills, from baking to data entry.

Inspired by Gardner's mission, the Cuyahoga Land Bank Authority (CLB) embarked on a multi-year effort to help the CCCC find a permanent headquarters. When the land bank found the perfect property—a house at 13611 Kinsman Road—they acquired it, rehabilitated it, and gifted the home to Anita and the CCCC in 2015 to serve as their permanent headquarters. The house is the "de facto second, third, and fourth responder serving the impoverished residents of the Mt. Pleasant Neighborhood," offering free secondhand clothes and housewares, hosting educational events and community meetings, and providing a clean, fully stocked bathroom open to any women and girls in the neighborhood looking for a safe space.

However, the house was just one parcel, surrounded by vacant lots and other condemned buildings. Access to fresh, healthy food was critical, and something that Mt. Pleasant was missing. A garden providing access to fresh fruits and vegetables could fill that gap, but she needed the land to start one.

CLB already owned two parcels behind the new CCCC headquarters, and the land bank dedicated them to Gardner to start Crooked Branch Farm, a working urban farm complete with a burgeoning fruit orchard, chicken coop, and hoop houses. Gardner, along with a tireless group of volunteers, helped the farm grow and thrive, and in 2022, Crooked Branch Farm had the honor of being named one of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 17 flagship People's Gardens and received a USDA grant of \$25,900 to expand. They plan to continue making the lot a community anchor by adding a fountain, fishpond, and more places for residents to gather.



# Project Ideas

This list shares some inspiration for what someone could do with a vacant lot in the community.

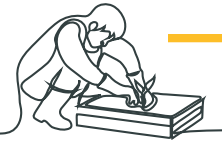
## Bioswale



**What is it?** Bioswales help trap and manage stormwater runoff by using grading and native plants.

**What does it take to start one?** Given the scale and complexity, bioswales—like other green infrastructure—require technical expertise on the team. They can be expensive and labor-intensive, but with huge community benefits for managing stormwater and reducing flooding.

## Community Garden



**What is it?** A garden provides fresh food, especially useful in “food deserts,” and bring people closer to where their food comes from.

**What does it take to start one?** It depends on the condition of the lot you want to use, how big your ambitions are, your access to a water source and other infrastructure, and how many volunteers are involved. Starting a community garden can be easy—keeping it going is the tricky part.

## Renewable Energy Production



**What is it?** Wind, solar, and biofuel are all clean sources of energy. Vacant and underutilized land could be used for solar farms, or for growing biofuel crops.

**What does it take to start one?** Building energy-producing infrastructure requires a lot of land and partners at different levels of government and utility companies. However, if your community has a large number of vacant lots—and especially larger lots—it may be worth exploring.

## Pollinator Garden



**What is it?** A garden with native plants (or plants that naturally grow locally) that attract pollinators such as bees, butterflies, and birds to strengthen the local ecosystem and promote biodiversity.

**What does it take to start one?** Pollinator gardens usually take more work in the first few years, with more watering and weeding so that the native plants can get established. However, maintenance will gradually decrease over time. Cost may be high or low depending on how much material is purchased.

## Public Art and Gathering Spaces



**What is it?** Public art can include sculptures, murals, and other gathering spaces that beautify a space and foster pride in a community.

**What does it take to start one?** Cost, time, and labor-intensity varies depending on the size and type of project. Connect with your neighbors to see what type of public art could be a great addition in your neighborhood!

Learn more about Vacant Land Stewardship: [communityprogress.org/resources/vacant-land](https://communityprogress.org/resources/vacant-land)

Find more project inspiration in our Vacant Land Projects database: [communityprogress.org/resources/vacant-land/projects](https://communityprogress.org/resources/vacant-land/projects)

## Windshield Survey

A windshield survey helps you understand the scale of vacant properties in your community. Assemble your neighbors (or established neighborhood group) to count vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties in a defined area, and track your observations below:

**Address:**

**How Long Has It Been Vacant?**

**Condition:**  
☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Fair ☐ Poor

**Property Type:**  
☐ Lot ☐ House ☐ Apartment ☐ Commercial ☐ Other

**Notes:**

**Address:**

**How Long Has It Been Vacant?**

**Condition:**  
☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Fair ☐ Poor

**Property Type:**  
☐ Lot ☐ House ☐ Apartment ☐ Commercial ☐ Other

**Notes:**

**Address:**

**How Long Has It Been Vacant?**

**Condition:**  
☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Fair ☐ Poor

**Property Type:**  
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☐ Lot ☐ House ☐ Apartment ☐ Commercial ☐ Other

**Notes:**

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**Property Type:**  
☐ Lot ☐ House ☐ Apartment ☐ Commercial ☐ Other

**Notes:**

**Address:**

**How Long Has It Been Vacant?**

**Condition:**  
☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Fair ☐ Poor

**Property Type:**  
☐ Lot ☐ House ☐ Apartment ☐ Commercial ☐ Other

**Notes:**



# Working with Your Local Government


Maybe you picked up this workbook because you're frustrated that your local government isn't doing enough for your community. We get it. But partnering with local government is helpful and, in many cases, necessary, because they can regulate what happens on private property (especially in the case of vacant and abandoned property where you might not know who owns it).

If you're just starting out with community revitalization, figuring out how your local government works, which departments do what, and what you're able to do as a concerned citizen, can help you avoid sticky legal situations, liabilities, and fines. If you've been organizing in your community for a while, your local government could fund or help you find funding for projects that benefit the community.

- **Vote in local elections:** If it isn't clear by now, your local government is responsible for most of the policies and practices around what happens to vacant and abandoned properties. Particularly, elected positions like a mayor, councilmember, or a county treasurer play a direct role in deciding the fate of vacant and abandoned properties. Make sure to read up on—and question—your local candidates about how they plan to address vacant and abandoned properties. Local elections historically have lower turnout than national ones, making your voice even more important.

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-  **Join a community taskforce:** Sometimes local governments will organize volunteer taskforces, committees, or neighborhood advisory boards to get input on projects related to housing, zoning, transportation, and public safety. You may find out about these opportunities at local government meetings or on your city's website. This is another way to share your concerns with local representatives.
-  **Run for local office:** If you're passionate about making a difference in your community, consider running for local office. You may be able to influence housing policy decisions in your community, be a voice for resident concerns, advocate for changes to code enforcement practices, and build leadership skills and connections that will help you further your community revitalization work.

## Success Story:

### Code “Encouragement”

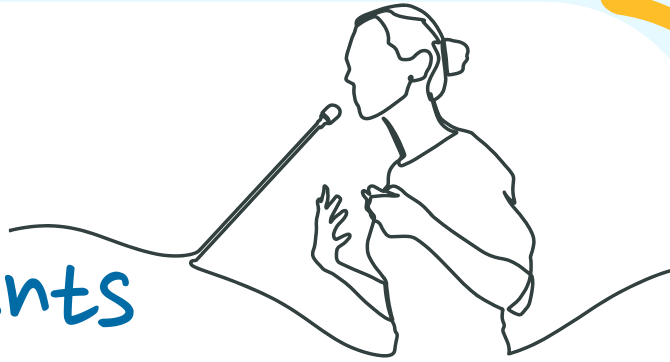
Joe Dulin, Community Development Director for the City of Peoria, Illinois, thinks about code enforcement from a place of compassion and understanding. The traditional approach to code enforcement focuses on issuing citations and fines to punish an owner into complying. Joe and his team of code enforcement inspectors decided to change that in an approach he dubbed “code encouragement.” They celebrated residents whose properties were in compliance through “Good Job!” door hangers; organized a Resident Appreciation Week where they visited residents and businesses and cleaned up litter throughout neighborhoods; and hosted regular Coffee with Code where residents could meet and get to learn more about their code enforcement inspectors.

Additionally, the City of Peoria invested in improving internal processes, like hiring. This included designing a rigorous onboarding process where new hires were taught about the root causes of issues in the community, such as Peoria's history of redlining. They also invited nonprofits to speak to new hires about the services they deliver so field staff could be better equipped to refer residents to the help they needed.

*“We’d like to believe in the general good of people living in the community. No one is consciously making the decision to decrease property values, cause conditions that might lead to higher crime, or create health inequities by their actions related to code enforcement,” said Joe. “It’s our job and duty as public servants to provide education and encouragement to residents and create a relationship to identify why the [issues] are happening in the first place. If we can approach our code enforcement with that mindset, the long-term outcomes of impacting and improving neighborhoods will be better.”*



## A Note for Public Servants



If you're reading this and you already serve in local government, listen up. The most important things for you to keep in mind when working with your community are **communication**, **transparency**, and **accessibility**. Residents often feel like they don't have a say in what happens to their neighborhoods, or like the work being done isn't "for them." In majority-Black and Brown communities that have experienced decades of disinvestment and racist policies, the word "revitalization" can sometimes feel synonymous with "gentrification," or conjure memories of destructive urban renewal initiatives.

So, to work effectively with your constituents and build the trust necessary for change, you can **communicate** better by making sure you have newsletters, public meetings, and other regularly updated resources like discussed on page 25. You can be **transparent** by creating pathways for residents to get engaged in the workings of government through taskforces, focus groups, and advisory committees. And you can be **accessible** by making sure to attend community meetings organized by residents and neighborhood organizations to demonstrate that you're willing to hear the issues and work to help resolve them.

**Next steps?** When was the last time you really looked at whether your policies for addressing vacant and abandoned properties were equitable, efficient, and effective? The Center for Community Progress delivers customized, expert guidance to help local governments assess their vacant property inventories, reform their delinquent property tax enforcement systems, improve code enforcement practices, and figure out if a land bank could help their community. Email us at [technicalassistance@communityprogress.org](mailto:technicalassistance@communityprogress.org) for more information.

# Finding Funding

Once you have an idea for a revitalization project in mind—whether it's turning a long-vacant structure into a community center, or transforming a vacant lot into a rain garden—your next question should be, “how are we going to pay for it?” After all, even with the help of volunteers, you need a good chunk of change to buy a property, secure the right permits, cover construction and legal costs, handle insurance and liability, and figure out long-term management and maintenance.

**Finding funding** might feel like the most daunting and least exciting part of community revitalization, especially when you're not sure how or where to look. This section highlights some best practices for finding funding, tips for fundraising, and how to get donors excited about your project so they get involved and stay committed.

## Before Seeking Funding

But wait! Before you make a GoFundMe or contact your local millionaire (if you're so lucky), take these steps:

- ✓ **Define a clear mission and vision statement:** Mission and vision statements make it crystal clear to you—and any partners you're working with—what your project's goal is, who it's for, and what success looks like. (see *Mission Statement vs. Vision Statement*, page 20)
- ✓ **Consider establishing a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization:** Creating a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization boosts your credibility and grants access to funding exclusively available to organizations with this status. There are a few requirements and documentation needed to get set up, so if you're considering establishing a nonprofit, visit [councilofnonprofits.org](http://councilofnonprofits.org) to learn more.
- ✓ **Tell your story:** Create a compelling narrative that's centered on your organization's mission and vision, emphasizing the positive, rather than negative, aspects of your work, and highlighting the possibilities the funding offers. (See call-out box)

### Examples

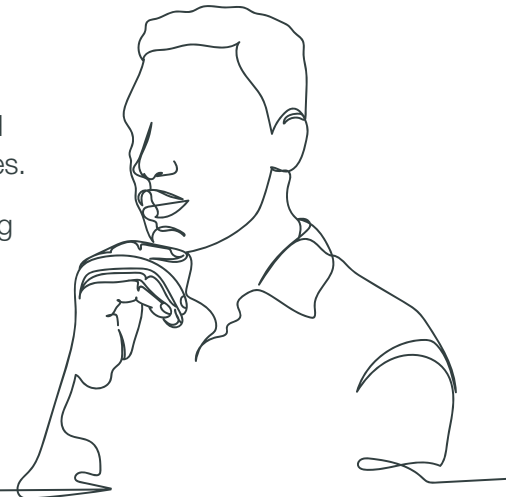
#### Tell Your Story

**Negative framing:** “Our community is a food desert. This has led to an increase in food insecurity and a decrease in public health. To combat this issue, we are urgently seeking funding to create a community garden. This small step can make a significant difference in addressing the larger issue.”

**Positive framing:** “We want to create healthy neighbors and neighborhoods by planting a community garden that will provide fresh, affordable produce to residents. Join us in making it happen!”

## Where to Look For Funding

- ✓ **Local libraries** have access to public databases containing information on local foundations, grant opportunities, and other resources.
- ✓ **Grant search portals** (like Foundation Center and GrantStation) offer webinars, proposal writing classes, and access to information on potential funders with both free and paid subscriptions.
- ✓ **Local businesses and faith institutions** all have a vested interest in seeing the community revitalize and can either help you with in-kind support, direct funding, or connect you with a broader network of potential funders.
- ✓ Building **authentic, in-person relationships** is key to securing long-term funding. Attend local speaking engagements, celebrations, and other community-oriented events to begin creating those relationships.
- ✓ Be active and **create a professional profile on social networks** like LinkedIn to find more opportunities.
- ✓ Access available grants and funding opportunities from private and government funds via a **paid subscription**. Visit [philanthropy.com](http://philanthropy.com).
- ✓ **Visit your local government website** for potential community funding opportunities and/or grants.
- ✓ **Research local foundations**—particularly community foundations and community development corporations—for potential funding opportunities.
- ✓ **Connect with like-minded individuals** to partner and apply to funding opportunities.
- ✓ **Crowdfunding** through popular platforms like ioby, GoFundMe, Fundly, or Kickstarter can help you raise money from multiple donors, allow neighbors to contribute small dollar amounts, and inform residents about your project plans.



## Mission Statement vs. Vision Statement

A mission statement outlines the reason the organization exists and should identify what solution is intended through its establishment. For instance, let's look at the mission statement of the Center for Community Progress:

*Our mission is to foster strong, equitable communities where vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties are transformed into assets for neighbors and neighborhoods.*

A vision statement, on the other hand, articulates the goals and aspirations of an organization and conveys the collective hopes of the team. It depicts what things will look like once you've accomplished your mission. Community Progress' vision:

*We envision a future where all people live in strong, healthy, just communities where widespread vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties no longer exist.*

## Fundraising 101

Though some may view fundraising as stressful and time-consuming, it can also be incredibly rewarding, especially when you know your end goal is to make an impact in your community.

The steps below outline the “Donor Cultivation Strategy.” This holistic, guided approach to fundraising describes how you can find and research potential donors; how you can create and sustain relationships with donors; and what to do before and after making the ask.

1. **Identify:** The first step is to identify potential donors. Research online, find local foundations, and explore your community to identify churches, nonprofits, and local government offices that may be interested in contributing to your cause.
2. **Qualify:** Research those donors to ensure that their vision aligns with your organization’s mission. Reach out to them to schedule an initial conversation to learn more about their values and priorities.
3. **Cultivate:** This is one of the most important steps in securing funding. Your focus should be to get to know your donor on an authentic level and have them learn more about you and your organization’s work. Building a strong relationship is essential when seeking funding. It offers benefits beyond just financial support, including additional networking opportunities, or recurring donations. Some ways you can build and nurture a relationship with potential donors are:
  - a. **Schedule a regular non-funding-related call.** Schedule check-ins to learn more about them and share what’s happening with your organization.
  - b. **Share your organization’s newsletter or impact report.** Keep donors informed about your work. This could potentially pique their interest in funding future programs.
  - c. **Invite potential donors to upcoming events.** Continue building rapport by inviting your donor to community events, whether it’s a meeting, a gala, or a block club party.
4. **Solicitation:** Be specific in your request. Clearly convey in your ask to potential donors how the funding will support project goals and activities and provide a target donation amount.
5. **Stewardship:** Thank your donor! If you’re able to successfully secure funding, be sure to keep your donor updated on project progress and key milestones. However, if you happen to receive a “no,” don’t be discouraged. Instead, politely ask for feedback and how you can improve your chances next time.

### TIP

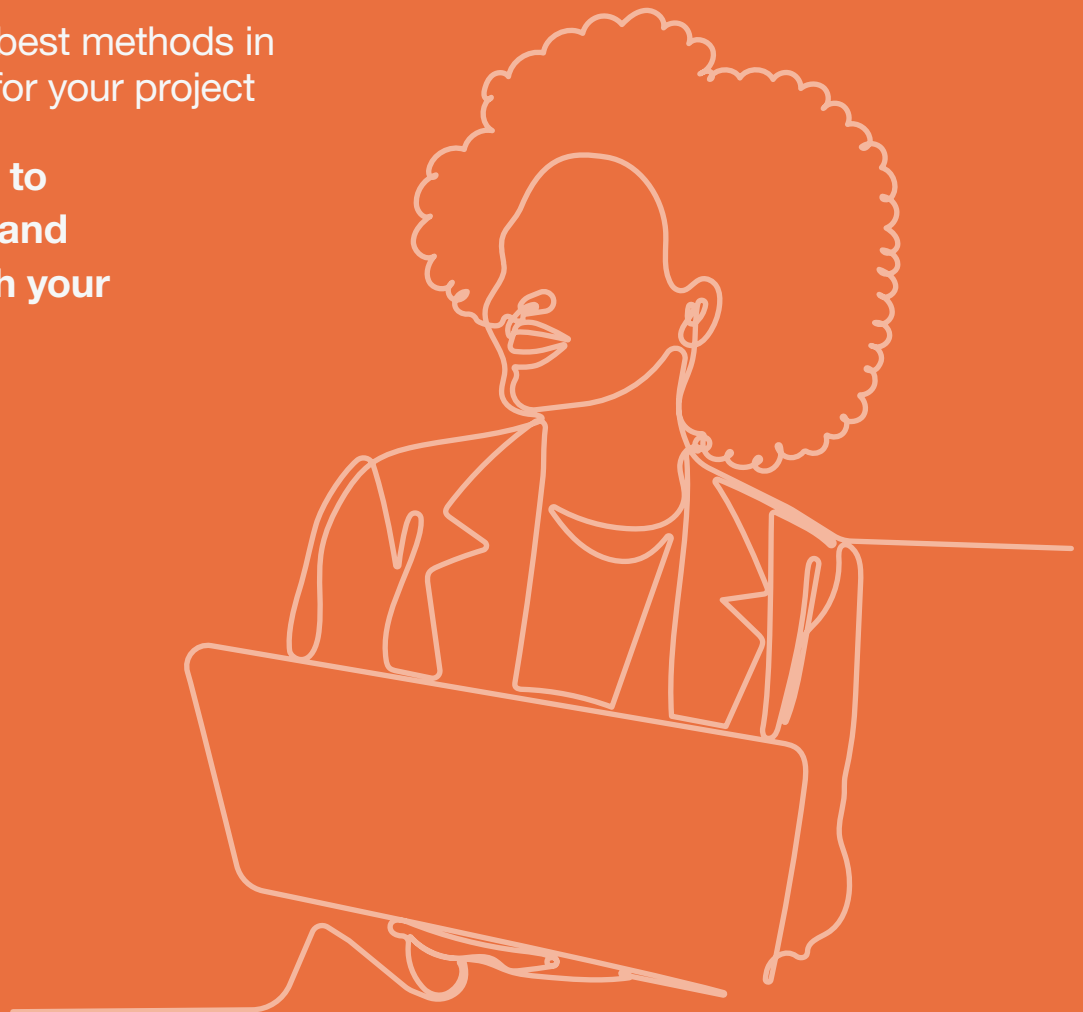
If you need help with grant writing, websites like [Foundation Center](#) and [Grant Central](#) offer grant writing assistance services for a small fee.

# Put it Into Action

## Thus far, you've...

- ✓ Learned how to get involved or get others involved
- ✓ Determined your strategy for dealing with vacant property
- ✓ Explored ways to partner with your local government
- ✓ Discovered the best methods in finding funding for your project

**Use the next pages to build out your plan and start to share it with your community.**





## My Plan for Tackling Vacant and Abandoned Properties

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**Community Name:**

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**How do I want to get involved or get others involved in  
addressing vacant properties in my neighborhood?**

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**What is the goal?**

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**Who can I enroll?** (i.e., what individuals are most important to getting this project launched)

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**Name/Role:**

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**Name/Role:**

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**Name/Role:**

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**Name/Role:**

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**My neighborhood project idea:**

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**What resources do I have?** (funding, information, etc.)

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**What resources do I need?**

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**When will I get started?**

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**What would make this project a success?**

## Glossary

**Abandoned Property:** Vacant property where the owner has walked away. It is often physically deteriorated, has delinquent property taxes, and places high demand on city services.

**Blight/Blighted Property:** A shorthand term many people use to refer to properties they perceive as problematic in some way: appearing unsafe, visually unpleasant, or a threat to neighborhood property values. However, this term is problematic and ambiguous, often used to describe people and neighborhoods, not just properties, as not worth salvaging. Community Progress does not use the term blight in our work, and prefers to use “vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties” instead.

**Code Enforcement:** A system of policies and practices used to enforce minimum housing and building standards. Enforcement tools may include fines/penalties to compel compliance or the local government fixing the code violation and charging the owner for its costs.

**Delinquent Property Tax Enforcement:** How the local government seeks the repayment of unpaid property taxes. Depending on state law, a government may sell the right to collect the unpaid taxes to a private party or the government may foreclose and sell the property to a new, more responsible user.

**Deteriorated Property:** Any type of property, occupied or unoccupied, which fails to meet minimum housing standards established in state or local law and which may pose a risk to the health or wellbeing of occupants or neighbors.

**Land Banks:** A public entity with unique powers to put vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties back to productive use according to community goals. A land bank's primary purpose is to acquire properties that some call “blighted” and temporarily hold and take care of them until they can be transferred to new, responsible owners. State laws give land banks their unique powers, which vary state-by-state.

**Land Banking Program:** Local governments or nonprofits in a state without land bank-enabling legislation can create land banking programs, however these programs have far more limited powers.

**Lien:** A legal interest secured against the property. Liens can be used to secure unpaid taxes, nuisance abatement costs from local government, unpaid water bills, and other debts.

**Systemic Vacancy:** The community experience of widespread property vacancy caused by the combined actions of people, policies, and processes.

**Tax-Delinquent Property:** Property where the owner has failed to pay property taxes by a defined date, usually set in state or local law.

**Vacant Land Stewardship:** The comprehensive repurposing and maintenance of vacant lots in a community in service to community needs, priorities, and goals.

**Vacant Property:** A vacant lot or an unoccupied structure; may or may not be substandard or otherwise imposing harm on the neighborhood.

## Additional Resources from Community Progress

### **Community Revitalization Fellowship (CRF):**

CRF is a learning opportunity that helps resident leaders revitalize neighborhoods struggling with serious challenges related to vacancy, abandonment, and disinvestment. CRF is offered every two years and helps grassroots leaders see resident-led efforts happening in other communities, share strategies and challenges, and build relationships. [communityprogress.org/crf](https://communityprogress.org/crf)

### **Creative Placemaking Database:**

The Creative Placemaking Database collects inspirational examples of how arts, culture, and creative placemaking have been used to reactivate vacant spaces. [communityprogress.org/resources/creative-placemaking/projects](https://communityprogress.org/resources/creative-placemaking/projects)

### **National Land Bank Map:**

Our interactive National Land Bank Map shows where the over 300 land banks and land banking programs exist around the country. [communityprogress.org/land-bank-map](https://communityprogress.org/land-bank-map)

### **Reclaiming Vacant Properties Conference (RVP):**

RVP is the only national conference dedicated to strategies for transforming vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties into community assets. Every two years, this event brings together over 1,000 people around common challenges in community revitalization so they can affect real change at home. [reclaimingvacantproperties.org](https://reclaimingvacantproperties.org)

### **Vacant to Vibrant Newsletter:**

Community Progress' monthly newsletter provides the latest news, resources, and educational opportunities to help communities tackle vacant properties. Subscribe at [subscribe.communityprogress.org/signup](https://communityprogress.org/signup)

### **Vacant, Abandoned, Deteriorated Properties Training Academy (VAD Academy):**

VAD Academy is a free, virtual bootcamp for public, private, nonprofit, and community leaders whose work and communities are impacted by challenges related to vacant properties. VAD Academy takes place annually each summer. [communityprogress.org/services/leadership-education/vad-academy](https://communityprogress.org/services/leadership-education/vad-academy)

### **Vacant Land Projects Database:**

The Vacant Land Projects Database features examples of vacant lots being transformed into community assets like pocket parks, gardens, gathering spaces, and more. [communityprogress.org/resources/vacant-land/projects](https://communityprogress.org/resources/vacant-land/projects)

### **Vacant Property Leadership Institute (VPLI):**

VPLI brings local government leaders together to tackle challenges with vacant properties in their communities. This competitive program provides intensive in-person training, targeted technical assistance, and access to a network of experts and practitioners. [communityprogress.org/vpli](https://communityprogress.org/vpli)

## National Organizations and Resources

**Enterprise Community Partners:** Enterprise Community Partners is a nonprofit organization committed to tackling the issue of insufficient affordable rental housing in the U.S. The primary areas of focus of Enterprise include finding innovative solutions for community development, capital development, and housing shortages. [enterprisecommunity.org](http://enterprisecommunity.org)

**Groundwork USA:** Groundwork USA is a network of local organizations that aim to improve the environment in low-resource communities. Their objective is to help create a sustainable environment, undo the effects of poverty and racial discrimination, and reduce the disparity in resources for communities that have been neglected. [groundworkusa.org](http://groundworkusa.org)

**Habitat for Humanity:** Habitat for Humanity is a global nonprofit organization that provides housing options for those in need in communities across all 50 states in the U.S. and around 70 countries. Habitat offers various programs such as assistance with homebuilding and affordable mortgage rates to provide secure housing for all individuals. [habitat.org](http://habitat.org)

**Keep America Beautiful:** Keep America Beautiful is a national nonprofit organization that aims to inspire residents to improve their communities by maintaining clean environments. The organization primarily focuses on organizing community clean-ups and creating green spaces that enhance the quality of life for residents. [kab.com](http://kab.com)

**Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC):** LISC is a nonprofit intermediary that provides financial resources, expertise, and support to residents and local institutions towards improving neighborhoods. They have 38 local offices, as well as a rural program that reaches over 2,400 counties in 49 states. [lisc.org](http://lisc.org)

**National Community-Based Organization Network (NCBON):** NCBON connects community-based organizations and their members on a national level. This helps improve their ability to collaborate with universities and agencies in their local areas and communities to promote health and influence national decision-making and policies. [sph.umich.edu/ncbon](http://sph.umich.edu/ncbon)

**National Legal Aid & Defender Association (NLADA):** NLADA is a national nonprofit association dedicated to providing quality legal services to those who cannot afford legal counsel. They offer advocacy, training, and technical support to members of the community, specifically those involved in public defense and civil legal aid. [nlada.org](http://nlada.org)

**NeighborWorks:** NeighborWorks is a dedicated organization that aims to provide affordable housing opportunities and strengthen communities. They offer various programs to support network organizations in establishing programs that meet the needs of the community. [neighborworks.org](http://neighborworks.org)

**Rebuilding Together:** Rebuilding Together collaborates with residents to carry out repairs resulting from natural disasters and other housing problems. Their main objective is to provide safe and healthy housing. Rebuilding Together joins forces with various organizations to revitalize communities successfully. [rebuildingtogether.org](http://rebuildingtogether.org)

**U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development:** The Department of Housing and Urban Development is a federal agency that is responsible for national policies and programs that aim to address the housing needs of Americans, improve, and develop communities, and enforce fair housing laws. The agency gives communities across the nation a voice at the Cabinet level. [hud.gov](http://hud.gov)

**University Data Centers:** Visiting your local university to access its data center can assist with improving your community. You can utilize their research, data, and records to assist in the grant writing process, community advocacy research, and community development assistance.

# Notes

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# The Resident's Workbook

## for Dealing with Vacant Buildings and Lots

September 2023

**BY: Christina Carter-Grant**, Associate Director  
of the National Land Bank Network

**CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS:**

**Maria Elkin**, Director of Communications

**Crystal Stevens**, Program Associate for National  
Leadership and Education



### About the Center for Community Progress

The Center for Community Progress helps people to transform vacant spaces into vibrant places. Since 2010, their team of experts has provided urban, suburban, and rural communities battling systemic vacancy with the policies, tools, and resources needed to address the full cycle of property revitalization. As the only national nonprofit dedicated to tackling vacant properties, Community Progress drives change by uncovering and disrupting the unjust, racist systems that perpetuate entrenched vacancy and property deterioration. Community Progress has delivered customized, expert guidance to leaders in over 300 communities and provided hundreds of hours of free educational resources as well as leadership programming to help policymakers, practitioners, and community members across the country return properties to productive use. To learn more and get help for your community, visit [communityprogress.org](https://communityprogress.org)

**Flint (Headquarters)**

111 E. Court St, Suite 2C-1  
Flint, MI 48502

**Washington, DC**

1101 14th St NW,  
Suite 510  
Washington, DC 20005

**Atlanta**

299 Joseph E. Lowery Blvd NW,  
Suite 203  
Atlanta, GA 30314

**Chicago**

100 S. State St, Suite 405  
Chicago, IL 60603

[info@communityprogress.org](mailto:info@communityprogress.org)

**(877) 542-4842**

Center for  
**COMMUNITY  
PROGRESS**